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Women's Sexuality and Sexual Orientation; A Sociological Explanation of Behavior

Mis-perceptions and biases surrounding women's sexual health and behavior makes it almost impossible to determine what constructs a women's sexual behavior; social forces or their personal orientation. Social forces may have a stronger influence on a women's sexual development and behavior than orientation, which is what incites the process of how she is perceived and thus constructs her behavior. Analysis of interviews with three women will attempt to theorize a micro-qualitative explanation behind female sexual behavior; Harriet, a 22 year old identified as a gay woman; Jane, a 21 year old who identifies as a heterosexual or straight woman; and Emily a 21 year old questioning/bisexual woman.

The topics addressed in the interviews include sexual history and orientation surrounding different stages of life. They will be discussed in the same order as they were presented in the interviews and lead into how they created the development of self-discovery in regards to the individual's orientation. The discussion will demonstrate how feelings about orientation and sexual behavior changed or developed because of current social norms and discuss those that it did not affect.

Childhood

Among the topics discussed were masturbation, defined as touching one self but not necessarily to climax; early exposure to sexual material, and sexual abuse or harassment, all were discussed in the context of occurrence in childhood, defined as pre-puberty.

The topic of masturbation was a theme for all the participants, regardless of orientation; they all discovered that pressure or touching felt right or natural but were afraid to explore or discuss it with their parents due the stigma of touching one's "privates". Both Jane and Emily began realizing that physical contact with their genitals was "natural" or "pleasurable" at about ages twelve and thirteen. This compared to Harriet, who described the experience of feeling arousal on more of a "sub-

conscience level; with more symbolic meaning” at about the ages five to seven.

Although there is a difference between these women in regards to childhood sexual behavior the explanation does not lie within the constraints of orientation, as is demonstrated by Harriet. Harriet who is considered by some to be “sexually deviant”, had the earliest of masturbation related experiences. Emily explained that it was frowned upon; you grow up being told by your mother “don't grab yourself” or “don't touch yourself” etc. Jane also had similar parental experiences. “They [parents] may want to present their children as little 'gentlemen' and 'ladies'. . . Their biases may lead them not to perceive genital touching as masturbation” (Rathus, Nevid and Fishner-Rathus, 2008). The social structure that constrained the women's behavior in the case of childhood sexuality seems to be family or parents, as opposed to peers from primary school; neither of which had to do with orientation, which at this time, according to all three women was a very vague concept.

Puberty

The three women were all asked to discuss their first experiences with masturbation; now defined as intentional stimulation, whether to climax or not. They were also asked to discuss the beginning feelings of their sexual orientation at this time and the discussions among their peer groups in regards to masturbation and orientation.

Harriet began self-pleasuring at a younger age than both Emily and Jane (approximately around age seven) by participating in what is considered rubbing. Jane started intentional self pleasuring at approximately age thirteen. However, Emily did not begin masturbating until her late teens, stating that “it didn't even occur to me that girls could do that too”. She discussed how male masturbation was brought up frequently whether in humor or in media, but never had she heard reference to it for a female. Though all three of these women did eventually participate in masturbation; Emily was actually the only one to fall into the norm or average, Harriet and Jane masturbated at an earlier age than the

average of their peers; young males are more likely to masturbate earlier than females and more males do so than females (Pinkerton et al., 2002).

All three women agreed that the public view of their peers not only made them reflect on their own behavior but inhibited all three of them from ever discussing (until their adulthood) their sexual behavior. They commented that masturbation was joked about for men but never discussed for any gender in any serious or mature manner. They felt that because they were girls, they could not discuss with their friends or even joke, as the boys did, about their masturbation habits; for fear of being isolated or made fun of. Emily demonstrates how lack of discussion around this topic inhibited her from even realizing that the act of masturbation was something available to females. This may suggest that acceptance of male masturbation and not female changes a woman's behavior by causing her to feel ashamed about a natural phenomenon or inhibit her from practicing something she may otherwise would have.

It does not appear that any of the women at this time were affected by their sexual orientation. For Harriet and Emily it was assumed that they were heterosexual as everyone was “supposed to be.” Harriet discussed being in middle school at the age of puberty and onset of masturbation and how it stopped her from exploring her feelings of women. There were always jokes and biases in regards to being “gay” or “butch lesbian”. She assumed, because of these biases, that she was not meant to explore her curiosities regarding women, and that she was to continue the process of sexual behavior “the normal way” with men, as she was “supposed to.”

First Sexual Experiences

The women were asked to discuss their first sexual experiences and those people involved closely to them. They were also asked to discuss how these experiences may have happened due to outside societal forces and with whom these experiences happened. They were asked about their first

kiss, touching or petting, and sexual intercourse (as defined by them).

All three women went through all major sexual “milestones” at around the same time, throughout high-school and early college. However, because of perceived notions about their orientations from others, their experiences were different. Harriet not only had a first kiss with a male, but with a female as well (male at 15, female at 16). However, she did not date a female until her first year of college at age eighteen. “I knew at this point that I was gay and attracted to women, but I went from dating a male again after dating a female to 'double check'.” Harriet discussed how this need to “double-check” even though she knew she was not heterosexual was because it was not the norm to be gay. She needed to be sure because if she was gay it would mean an immense amount of work as far as “coming-out” and facing social biases. This pressure to only be with men despite her natural feelings was also felt by Emily.

Emily has not been with a woman but with only men. She has been with four men in regards to sexual intercourse (defined by her as vaginal penetration by the penis). Two of these men were experiences simply for sexual purposes and outside of the context of a serious relationship. She defined these two experiences happening because she felt lost or pressured that it “was the thing to do.” She knows that she would be able to and wants to enjoy a relationship with a woman, but the stigma following bisexuality is strong.

“I’m really nervous because when I talk to a lot of people about gay and lesbian issues etc, not many acknowledge bisexuality as legitimate; it’s assumed someone who is bisexual is just a slut or can’t get attention from anyone so opens to both sides. That’s not true at all, I just know that if the situation felt right, I could be in a relationship with a man or a woman; it’s not purely sexual.”

This social bias has stopped her from developing her sexuality in a way that felt natural to her.

It may be assumed that both Harriet and Emily were inhibited from exploring their sexuality naturally because of their attraction to women. Though it is not as strongly influenced from society heterosexual women still experience norms enforcing them to do what is unnatural to them. Jane stated

that her first boyfriend in high school highly pressured her for sex constantly. She did not have sex with him(,); her first time was in college with her current partner. However, the pressure and harassment continued throughout the four month relationship with her high school boyfriend. She also mentioned that she participated in oral sex with him because she felt as though that was “what you're supposed to do.” She explained how the assumption in high school was that, if you were in a relationship the next logical and expected step was sexual activity. “I was in a relationship, and that's what you do.” She was uncomfortable with giving and receiving oral sex. She never experienced climax from him and was constantly pressured to perform oral sex for him.

Although these women were constrained in different ways, all three, regardless of their orientation experienced social pressures to perform, or not perform in the cases of Emily and Harriet, in the way that felt right for them. All of these women felt that their sexual development was inhibited by trying to avoid their natural sexual urges out of fear of “[social] persecution or embarrassment” (Emily).

The Medical Community

The women were asked to discuss women's health appointments. All three stated that they made their first women's appointments because it felt as though it was time, they were preparing for college, and all three were interested in the prospects of oral contraception. For Harriet it was intended for menstrual problems, but also as a “backup” or “safety net.” All three have told their doctor's about their sexual history in regards to partners and first sexual experiences. However, both Emily and Harriet have not told their doctors about their feelings towards females, and Harriet has not told her doctor about her one female sexual partner at the beginning of college. Their reasoning stems from the same fear about cultural biases. Emily mentioned that she is afraid her doctor will see her as someone who is just “sexually deviant”, with a “high libido”, or that it is “a phase.” Though Emily mentioned that she

has a very liberal doctor, who she likes, and is sure would be alright with it, the fear still remains. Jane, being free from this fear, has told her doctor about her one sexual partner.

This fear of even the medical community being uncomfortable with sexual orientation is realistic. For generations doctors have perceived gay and bisexual women as deviant, and only needing guidance. This is not a past phenomenon, in 2006 a lesbian woman was denied treatment at a New Hampshire dentist for listing her female partner under “spouse” on the office’s “get acquainted” card and in 2007 a Floridian women went to her doctor with a cough and left with a prescription for bible versus (Debold 2007). Discrimination such as this can be detrimental to an individual’s health, and sixteen percent of lesbian women have admitted to delaying treatment due to stigmas regarding their sexual orientation (Debold 2007).

Current Sexual Behavior

The three respondents were asked about their current behaviors and how ideologies surrounding their orientations have affected their behavior. Jane discussed that she has had a few occasions where she has almost participated in sexual intercourse with previous partners (before her current boyfriend), she described it as participating in sexual behavior, out of pressure or desire, but stopping just short of intercourse despite the specific pressure for it. Since this experience she has had her first sexual intercourse, and is currently with the same partner.

Emily said that cultural ideas surrounding her sexual orientation has stopped her from pursuing a relationship with a female. “I’m not quite ready to come out and define it as bisexual”. She says that she has been attracted to women and there are a few she would care to have a long term relationship with, but currently she is in a relationship with a male. She cares for her current partner and is happy within the relationship but has yet to even divulge to him her true feelings about her sexuality from fear of not being able to be with him anymore.

Harriet has not had a relationship in three years. She explains that her orientation has affected her sexual behavior simply because it is so much more competitive. There are not nearly as many gay women in her community as heterosexual. She stated that it has helped to define herself as “gay”, as opposed to lesbian, because even that label has less stigma and assumptions surrounding it. She mentioned that using the term “gay” is “more encompassing” and “socially accepted” in and out of the LGBTQ community.

Regardless of their sexual orientations, none of these women has experienced what they may have wished due to societal ideologies. Regardless of orientation, as women they are more harshly persecuted for their sexual behavior. Emily mentioned that if you are a woman with more than two sexual partners you are a “slut,” whereas if you are man in the same situation you are “the man” and more highly regarded.

Development of Sexual Orientation

Jane has known since she was younger that she was interested solely in men. Unlike Harriet and Emily, she did not experience the feelings of being expected to be with a man, but that it felt “natural” to her. She has logically thought out what a female partner would mean for her, but that is not what she feels she is intrinsically attracted to. Her orientation has affected her in the sense that she has been pressured to participate in sexual activity but she said that she has been lucky in the sense that she falls within the “normative orientation.” Emily, through discussion with peers of varying orientations, has slowly become aware of the fact that her thoughts and feelings towards women, are “okay,” and that it's more than just her imagination. She has discovered that she could be in a relationship with a woman or a man, and she hopes she can slowly have more and more open discussions with peers about the subject and eventually “come-out” as a bisexual. Harriet, who is “out” as a gay female, discussed that, although she has always known that she solely liked females, she still dated men, even after having kissed and

having a relationship with a female. Due to cultural ideas she felt as though she needed to ignore her natural instinct and just “double-check.” She has passed that stage and is comfortable and happy as a gay female.

Conclusion

I have concluded that social forces have a stronger influence over a woman's sexual behavior than her orientation. If anyone of these women were to develop their sexuality based upon only their orientation, and ignoring societal pressures, they would have had very different experiences. These three women have gone through a lot of difficulties becoming who they are sexually due to biases against female sexuality. One of the biggest biases against women was an ongoing theme throughout these interviews. That women's sexuality is highly feared in society and as a result is strictly defined and regulated. All three of these women, even though they have different orientations, experienced the same thing; a lack of freedom to express their sexuality as was seen natural to them, this was due to their status as women and the cultural ideologies surrounding that status. These discussions with Harriet, Jane and Emily provide evidence that there needs to be social change with regard to what a woman is “supposed” and not “supposed” to do sexually.

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